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Nehru's ideas on Secularism:

Nehru's ideas about secularism were born in his childhood when he experienced being nurtured in a secular ambience. His resident teacher was Ferdinand T. Brooks, a theosophist; interactions with Annie Besant and Munshi Mubarak Ali, a Munshi of his father, and living with Jews in Harrow left a deep impact on him and at the initial level removed many religious dogmas from his mind. The exposure to rich English philosophical thoughts played an important role in his life but greater was the influence of Buddhism which dissolved the feeling of discrimination. The birth of Buddhism is traced to a reaction against the restricted nature of Hinduism. Nehru learnt a lot from it.

Nehru was aware about the historical past of India. He was basically a historian and convinced that India was a plural society, not a country with only one religious affiliation. Hinduism was responded to by Buddhism and Jainism in ancient times when new social forces had emerged. For him, the advent of Christianity and Islam was as significant as the arrival of Zoroastrianism in the country. He discovered that people from different religions had shared memories which were not at odds with each other. The war of independence in 1857 was its reflection when Hindus and Muslims had fought together. Nehru had discerned this main element of the shared memory of Indian culture, and he attempted to build an edifice of secularism on it.

When he entered political life, he applied his knowledge of history to infer that the communal forces received wide support from the political authorities. He opposed British rule on this ground deducing that the birth of communalism was due to multiple factors but British rule was a major contributor. In later years this thought matured substantially. He concluded that a functional government structure must encourage and sustain religious diversity. India is a country with multiple religions; hence the government can never be biased towards any specific religion. Therefore, religion had no place in politics. On this point he comes close to Machiavelli who advocated separation of politics from religion. Here Nehru differed from Gandhi for whom spiritualisation of politics was a major objective of political life. Though both had respect for all the religions, Nehru and Gandhi were true secularists but differed on the application of religion in political life.

Communalism and majoritarianism had no place in his thought process which had identified secularism as the truth of the ages with empirical teleology. He was aware about the dangers posed by majoritarianism during the national movement. The Hindu reactionary organisations and movements, which had emerged particu-larly during the 1910s and 1920s, were a threat to national unity. He decided to serve the cause of nationalism by recognising the fundamental unity prevalent in all religions. He upheld the cause of nationalism by bringing together people from all major religions on the issue of national unity. Gandhi had taken a step in that direction during the Khilafat movement; Nehru reinforced that process in the next decade by associating himself with the nationalist Muslim leaders.

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His anti-communal approach was thus governed by the larger cause of strengthening the national movement. This approach in the pre-independence era culminated in the post-independence phase when Nehru nourished secularism with the clear objective of ensuring respect for religious diversity and focus on national development by associating all sections.

Nehru was a rationalist knowing well that human values were superior to religious orthodoxies. His conflict with several people on religious show-offs suggested that he was absolutely against any form of ritualism, religious superstitions and unscientific metaphysical approach to life. His secular credentials were based upon his rational humanistic attitude towards life, and this life was more important than the one after death. His attention was riveted to betterment of life in this age, not the age about which we are in the dark. This idea was probably shaped by his inclination towards Buddhism in which the concept of God is not recognised. Humanism is real religion and serving the downtrodden the greatest worship, Nehru embodied and practised this in full measure.

His emphasis on the development of scientific temperament is a great contribution to India because it initiated the fight against religious obscurantism and superstition which the whole country was steeped in. For this reason, Nehru can be characterised as a person carrying forward the tradition of the great social reformer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy; both played a crucial role in the elimination of social orthodoxies.

His belief in secularism was enriched by the emphasis on scientific analysis of the mundane order. This order cannot sustain for a long period of time unless it is based upon certain pillars. From his dissection of communalism Nehru discovered that secularism was the sole response to the communal forces. Scientific life-style was its pragmatic base. When secularism was to be practised, no other political system could be established except one which was a functional democracy. Democracy and secularism are therefore twin siblings. Yet another outstanding contribution of Nehru is the gift of the twin siblings to the nation. This is what makes him an exceptional figure in human history.

Secularism is also related to the other philosophical pillars of the human civilisation. These are the universal values of equality and liberty. He knew that no secular order can be sustained unless people from all streams of religious life enjoy equality and liberty of the highest form. This thought was manifest in his Objectives Resolution in the Constituent Assembly.

Nehru applied secularism in the development of the human spirit and nation. He never used religion for votes. He articulated the humanistic values inherent in religious equality. His secular ideas flow from the great Indian tradition; hence those are not anti-religion but receive sustenance from humanism and universal ethics.

In contemporary India his ideas on secularism are of utmost relevance when new clouds of fears, apprehensions and uncertainties are gathering over the nation’s social horizon.